

27. The apparatus of claim 20, wherein the means for passing the reactant stream and the hot gaseous stream through an injection line having a reduced diameter comprises an injection line in a torch section.

28. The apparatus of claim 20, wherein the means for minimizing radial temperature gradients comprises a hot wall surrounding a reaction zone of the axial reactor, with the hot wall surrounded by an insulating layer.

29. The apparatus of claim 28, wherein the hot wall comprises a carbon layer.

30. The apparatus of claim 20, further comprising a converging-diverging nozzle arranged coaxially with the outlet end of the axial reactor to rapidly cool the gaseous stream by converting thermal energy as a result of a adiabatic and isentropic expansion as the gaseous stream flows axially through the nozzle while minimizing back reactions, thereby retaining the desired end product within the flowing gaseous stream.

31. The apparatus of claim 20, further comprising a converging nozzle positioned at the outlet end of the axial reactor.

32. The apparatus of claim 20, further comprising a cooling section downstream from the axial reactor for reducing the velocity of the moving gaseous stream while removing heat energy at

a rate sufficient to prevent increases in kinetic temperature and to retain the desired end product within the gaseous stream.

33. A method for thermally converting one or more reactants in a thermodynamically stable high temperature gaseous stream to a desired end product in the form of a gas or ultrafine solid particles, the method comprising the steps of:

introducing a reactant stream upstream from one end of an axial reactor;

α1 heating the reactant stream as the reactant stream flows axially through an injection line;

passing the reactant stream axially through a reaction zone of the axial reactor, the reaction zone maintained at a substantially uniform temperature over the length of the reaction zone, wherein the axial reactor has a length and a temperature and is operated under conditions sufficient to effect heating of the reactant stream to a selected reaction temperature at which a desired product stream is produced at a location adjacent an outlet end of the axial reactor; and

cooling and slowing the velocity of the desired end product and remaining gaseous stream exiting from the reactor.

34. The method of claim 33, wherein the injection line has a reduced diameter with respect to the axial reactor to produce turbulent flow and thereby thoroughly mix the reactant stream with a heating gas.

35. The method of claim 33, wherein the reactant stream before reaction or thermal decomposition thereof comprises at least one reactant selected from the group consisting of titanium tetrachloride, vanadium tetrachloride, aluminum trichloride and natural gas.

36. The method of claim 33, further comprising the step of separating the desired end product from the remaining gases in the cooled gaseous stream.

37. The method of claim 33, further comprising the step of providing a converging-diverging nozzle arranged coaxially with the outlet end of the reactor to rapidly cool the gaseous stream by converting thermal energy as a result of a adiabatic and isentropic expansion as the gaseous stream flows axially through the nozzle and minimizing back reactions, thereby retaining the desired end product within the flowing gaseous stream.
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38. The method of claim 37, wherein the converging-diverging nozzle has a converging section and a diverging section respectively leading to and from a restrictive open throat, the diverging section of the nozzle having a conical configuration.

39. The method of claim 37, wherein the converging-diverging nozzle has a converging section and a diverging section respectively leading to and from a restrictive open throat, the diverging section of the nozzle having a conical configuration with an included angle of less than about 35°.

40. The method of claim 37, wherein the converging-diverging nozzle has a converging section with a high aspect ratio and is configured so that the gaseous stream accelerates rapidly into the nozzle throat while maintaining laminar flow.

41. The method of claim 33, wherein the step of cooling and slowing the velocity of the resulting desired end product and remaining gaseous stream as it exits from the reactor is accomplished by directing a quenching gas into the gaseous stream at a rate that condenses the desired end product and inhibits formation of other equilibrium products as the resulting gaseous stream exits the reactor.

42. The method of claim 37, further comprising the step of controlling the residence time and reaction pressure of the gaseous stream in the reactor by selecting the size of a restrictive open throat within the nozzle.

43. The method of claim 37, further comprising the step of subjecting the gaseous stream to an ultra fast decrease in pressure by smoothly accelerating and expanding the moving gaseous stream along the diverging section of the nozzle to further decrease its kinetic temperature and prevent undesired side or back reactions.

44. The method of claim 33, further comprising a carbon layer surrounding the reaction zone, wherein the carbon layer minimizes radial temperature gradients.

45. The method of claim 33, further comprising a carbon layer surrounding the reaction zone and a cooling layer surrounding the carbon layer, wherein the carbon layer and the cooling layer minimize radial temperature gradients.

46. A method of forming a metal, metal oxide or metal alloy from a metal-containing compound, the method comprising the steps of:

providing a plasma formed from a gas comprising an inert gas, hydrogen, or a mixture thereof;

providing a reagent or a reagent mixture, the reagent or reagent mixture comprising a gaseous or volatilized compound of a selected metal;

thoroughly mixing the reagent or reagent mixture with the plasma upstream from an axial reactor to produce a reactant stream;

passing the reactant stream axially through a reaction zone of the reactor, the reaction zone maintained at a substantially uniform temperature over the length of the reaction zone, wherein the reactor has a length and a temperature and is operated under conditions sufficient to effect heating of the reactant stream to a selected reaction temperature at which a desired product stream is produced at a location adjacent an outlet end of the reactor, thereby forming an equilibrium mixture comprising the selected metal or an oxide or alloy thereof, the selected metal, metal oxide or metal alloy being thermodynamically stable at the reaction temperature;

cooling the gaseous stream exiting the outlet end of the reactor by reducing the velocity of the gaseous stream while removing heat energy at a rate sufficient to prevent increases in its kinetic temperature; and

separating desired end products from gases remaining in the cooled gaseous stream.

47. The method of claim 46, wherein the gaseous or volatilized compound of the selected metal is a gaseous or volatilizable halide.

48. The method of claim 46, wherein the selected metal is titanium, vanadium, or aluminum.

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49. The method of claim 46, wherein the compound of the selected metal is titanium tetrachloride, vanadium tetrachloride, or aluminum trichloride.

50. The method of claim 46, wherein the reagent or reagent mixture further comprises at least one additional reagent capable of reacting at the reaction temperature to form an equilibrium mixture comprising an oxide or alloy of the selected metal.

51. The method of claim 46, wherein the method forms titanium metal, and the reagent or reagent mixture comprises titanium tetrachloride.

52. The method of claim 46, wherein the method forms vanadium metal, and the reagent or reagent mixture comprises vanadium tetrachloride.

53. The method of claim 46, wherein the method forms aluminum metal, and the reagent or reagent mixture comprises aluminum trichloride.

54. The method of claim 46, wherein the method forms an alloy of titanium and a second metal, and the reagent or reagent mixture comprises titanium chloride and a gaseous or volatilizable compound of the second metal.

55. The method of claim 54, wherein the second metal is vanadium.

56. The method of claim 46, wherein the method forms a metal oxide of the selected metal, and the reagent or reagent mixture further comprises oxygen.

57. The method of claim 46, wherein the method forms titanium oxide, and the reagent or reagent mixture comprises titanium tetrachloride and oxygen.

58. A method of forming a desired product from a hydrocarbon, the method comprising the steps of:

providing a plasma formed from a gas comprising an inert gas, hydrogen, or a mixture thereof;

providing a reagent or a reagent mixture, the reagent or reagent mixture comprising gaseous or volatilized hydrocarbon;

thoroughly mixing the reagent or reagent mixture with the plasma upstream from an axial reactor to produce a reactant stream;

passing the reactant stream axially through a reaction zone of the reactor, the reaction zone maintained at a substantially uniform temperature over the length of the reaction zone, wherein the reactor has a length and a temperature and is operated under conditions sufficient to effect heating of the reactant stream to a selected reaction temperature at which a desired product stream is produced at a location adjacent an outlet end of the reactor, thereby forming an equilibrium mixture comprising the desired product, the desired product being thermodynamically stable at the reaction temperature; and

cooling the gaseous stream exiting at the outlet end of the reactor by reducing the velocity of the gaseous stream while removing heat energy at a rate sufficient to prevent increases in its kinetic temperature; and

separating desired end products from gases remaining in the cooled gaseous stream.

59. The method of claim 58, wherein the reagent or reagent mixture comprises natural gas.

60. The method of claim 58, wherein the reagent or reagent mixture comprises methane.

61. The method of claim 58, wherein the desired product comprises acetylene.

62. An apparatus for thermal conversion of one or more reactants in a thermodynamically stable high temperature gaseous stream to a desired end product in the form of a gas or ultrafine solid particles, the apparatus comprising:

an axial reactor having a reaction zone, an inlet end, and an outlet end, the reaction zone maintained at a substantially uniform temperature over the length of the reaction zone, wherein the axial reactor has a length and a temperature and is operated under conditions sufficient to effect heating of a reactant stream to a selected reaction temperature at which a desired product stream is produced at a location adjacent the outlet end of the axial reactor;

a torch section upstream from the axial reactor and configured to produce a plasma; and

an injector section interposed between the torch section and the axial reactor, the injector section configured to introduce one or more reactants into the plasma to produce a hot gaseous stream flowing axially toward the outlet end of the axial reactor.

63. The apparatus of claim 62, further comprising a convergent-divergent nozzle located coaxially with the outlet end of the axial reactor for rapidly cooling the gaseous stream by converting thermal energy to kinetic energy as a result of adiabatic and isentropic expansion as the gaseous stream flows axially through the nozzle.

64. The apparatus of claim 63, wherein the convergent-divergent nozzle has a converging section and a diverging section respectively leading to and from a restrictive open throat, the diverging section having a conical configuration centered along the reactor axis.

65. The apparatus of claim 63, further comprising a cooling section leading from the convergent-divergent nozzle.

66. The apparatus of claim 65, wherein the cooling section is configured to reduce the velocity of the flowing gaseous stream while removing heat energy at a rate sufficient to prevent increases in its kinetic temperature and to retain the desired end product within the gaseous stream.

67. The apparatus of claim 62, further comprising a cooling section in fluid communication with the outlet end of the axial reactor.

68. The apparatus of claim 67, wherein the cooling section is configured to reduce the velocity of the flowing gaseous stream while removing heat energy at a rate sufficient to prevent increases in its kinetic temperature and to retain the desired end product within the gaseous stream.

69. The apparatus of claim 67, further comprising a converging section that connects the outlet end of the axial reactor to the cooling section.

70. The apparatus of claim 62, wherein the injector section comprises a multi-port injector located in an injector line.

71. The apparatus of claim 62, further comprising a multi-port injector located in the torch section.

72. The apparatus of claim 62, wherein the torch section includes an anode injector.

73. The apparatus of claim 62, further comprising an insulating layer surrounding the reaction zone, wherein the insulating layer minimizes radial temperature gradients.

74. The apparatus of claim 62, wherein the torch section comprises a plasma torch having a plasma arc inlet for introducing a stream of plasma arc gas to the plasma torch to produce a plasma within the reactor which extends toward the outlet end of the reactor.

75. An apparatus for thermal conversion of one or more reactants in a thermodynamically stable high temperature gaseous stream to a desired end product in the form of a gas or ultrafine solid particles, the apparatus comprising:

an axial reactor having a reaction zone within an enclosed reactor chamber, the reaction zone maintained at a substantially uniform temperature over the length of the reaction zone, the reactor chamber having an inlet end axially spaced from an outlet end, the reactor further comprising an insulating layer configured to minimize radial temperature gradients;

a plasma torch including at least one pair of electrodes positioned upstream from the inlet end of the reactor chamber;

a plasma arc gas inlet upstream from the electrodes for introducing a stream of plasma arc gas between the electrodes at a selected plasma gas flow while the electrodes are

subjected to a selected plasma input power level to produce a plasma within the reactor chamber extending toward the outlet end of the reactor chamber;

at least one reactant inlet upstream from the inlet end of the reactor chamber, whereby an incoming reactant stream is thoroughly mixed into the plasma prior to entering the reactor chamber; and

a coaxial cooling section downstream from the reactor chamber for reducing the velocity of the gaseous stream while removing heat energy at a rate sufficient to prevent increases in its kinetic temperature to retain a desired end product within the gaseous stream; wherein the axial reactor has a length and a temperature and is operated under conditions sufficient to effect heating of the reactant stream to a selected reaction temperature at which the desired end product is produced at a location adjacent the outlet end of the axial reactor.

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76. The apparatus of claim 75, further comprising a convergent-divergent nozzle located coaxially between the reactor chamber and the cooling section to rapidly cool the gaseous stream by converting thermal energy as a result of a adiabatic and isentropic expansion as it flows axially through the nozzle while minimizing back reactions, thereby retaining the desired end product within the flowing gaseous stream.

77. The apparatus of claim 75, further comprising a converging section positioned between the reactor chamber and the cooling section.

78. The reactor of claim 75, wherein the reactant inlet comprises a multi-port injector located in an injector line.

79. The reactor of claim 75, wherein the reactant inlet comprises a multi-port injector adjacent to the plasma torch.

80. The apparatus of claim 75, wherein the reactant inlet comprises an anode injector.

81. An apparatus for thermal conversion of one or more reactants in a thermodynamically stable high temperature gaseous stream to a desired end product in the form of a gas or ultrafine solid particles, the apparatus comprising:

an axial reactor having a reaction zone, an inlet end, and an outlet end, the reaction zone maintained at a substantially uniform temperature over the length of the reaction zone, wherein the axial reactor has a length and a temperature and is operated under conditions sufficient to effect heating of a reactant stream to a selected reaction temperature at which a desired product stream is produced at a location adjacent the outlet end of the axial reactor; and

a torch section upstream from the axial reactor and configured to produce a plasma, the torch section including an anode injector configured to introduce one or more reactants into the plasma to produce a hot gaseous stream flowing axially toward the outlet end of the axial reactor.

82. The apparatus of claim 81, further comprising a cooling section in fluid communication with the outlet end of the axial reactor.

83. The apparatus of claim 82, wherein the cooling section is configured to reduce the velocity of the flowing gaseous stream while removing heat energy at a rate sufficient to prevent increases in its kinetic temperature and to retain the desired end product within the gaseous stream.

84. The apparatus of claim 82, further comprising a converging section that connects the outlet end of the axial reactor to the cooling section.

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85. The apparatus of claim 81, wherein the anode injector comprises a multi-port injector.

86. The apparatus of claim 81, further comprising an insulating layer surrounding the reaction zone, wherein the insulating layer minimizes radial temperature gradients.

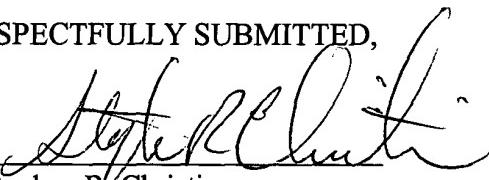
87. The apparatus of claim 81, wherein the torch section includes a plasma torch having a plasma arc inlet for introducing a stream of plasma arc gas to the plasma torch to produce a plasma within the reactor which extends toward the outlet end of the reactor.

REMARKS

By this Preliminary Amendment, Applicants have added new claims 21-87. Accordingly, claims 1-87 are now pending for the Examiner's consideration. The new claims are fully supported

by the specification and original claims as filed. Accordingly, favorable consideration of the pending claims is respectfully requested.

RESPECTFULLY SUBMITTED,

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